

LET A SENSE OF ADVENTURE GET THE BETTER OF YOU

travel



The luxurious eight-person Delfin I moored at dusk on the banks of the upper reaches of the Amazon river.



A canoe enters dense vegetation in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon. The jungle is crowded with hundreds of thousands of plant species, OPPOSITE, all competing for space and sunlight.



JUNGLE FEVER

Our intrepid explorers, David Prior and Pablo Zamora, venture into the tangled wilderness that is the South American Amazon.

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THERE ARE RAINFORESTS and there are *jungles*. Scientists will tell you that they are one and the same, that 'jungle' is a superfluous, colonial-era descriptor that is best left to the diaries and novels of adventurers and romantics. I have been to countless rainforests. I have admired their polite eco-systems, walked the 90-minute trail to the obligatory ancient tree or waterfall and have happily gone on my way, content but never challenged. That was not the case on this visit to the deepest reaches of the Amazon, a place so impenetrable, unpredictable and not yet fully understood that it truly deserves the evocative title of 'jungle'. As the environmental degradation that comes with development and speculation continues its inexorable climb up the mighty river, to witness nature at its most powerful is to travel closer to its heart than ever before. Few are aware that the Amazon exists outside the expansive borders of Brazil but in fact its most pure, scenic and exotic pockets can be found largely beyond the borders of Brazilian development. It is for this reason I find myself travelling to Peru. Though it is best known as the country of roaming llamas and peaks crowned by Incan monuments, a large percentage of this incredibly diverse country is on the other side of the Andes, constituting a significant part of the upper reaches of one of the natural world's final frontiers. Peru is on a mission to show the world its embarrassment of natural riches and it is now the simplest gateway to experience the Amazon at its near pristine. While the country's record is not spotless, its efforts to preserve a chunk of the mythic basin relies largely on eco-tourism; in other words, visit it to save it.

DAY ONE Insist on a window seat when flying from Peru's capital Lima to the Amazon. In impatience, I opt for the aisle, and from the moment the plane lifts off from the parched Pacific coastline and begins to ascend the Andes, I am rubbemecking. Graciously, my fellow passengers seem to understand. We sit equally transfixed as plains quickly morph into highlands, soar into mountains and then drop away to reveal an endless expanse of deepest, darkest green. We begin to circle what seems to be an impossibly small scar of emerald green, lonely amid the dense vegetation and muddy brown tentacles of river. Once we land, the humidity invades the cabin, as the airconditioning becomes jets of cold steam labouring against the heat. We are bound for Inkaterra's Reserva Amazonica lodge near the outpost town Puerto Maldonado in the south.



OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: a vintage plane sits on the runway, a reminder of a time when travelling to the Peruvian Amazon was slightly more perilous; a guide from Inkaterra leads a young couple on a jungle hike in search of macaws and the ever-elusive toucan; the bovine-wary caiman enthusiast, Anabel, points to a family of "stinky birds" nesting in the trees near the water. THIS PAGE: before embarking the Delfin I, guests are encouraged to rest in the riverside wooden hut in the town of Nauta.



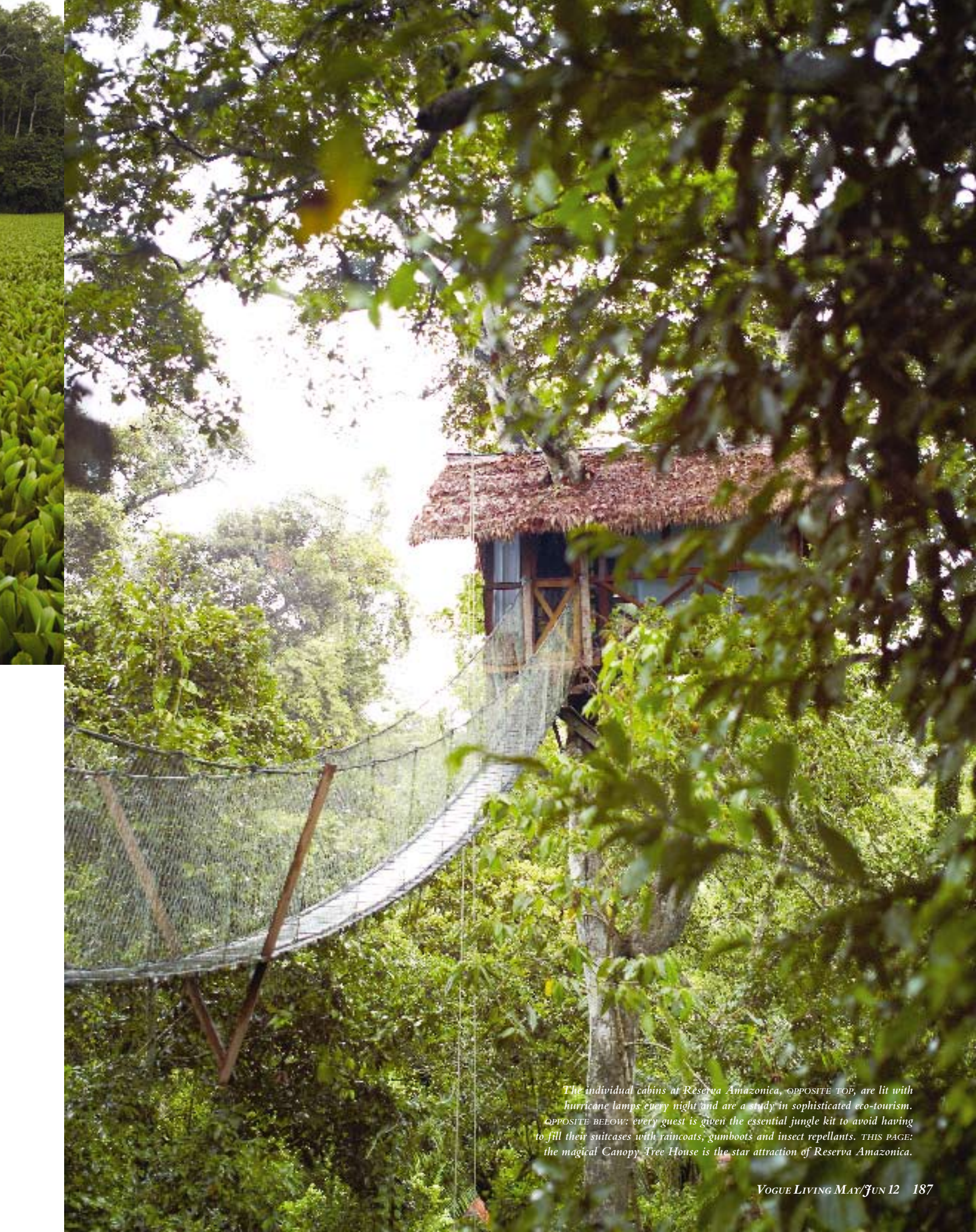


While technically not part of the Amazon, the south has some of the most untouched tracts of forest and most exuberant wildlife. We arrive mid-afternoon and are collected from the airport by the congenial and mostly local staff of Reserva Amazonica. Inkaterra is Peru's most established eco-tourism operator and its flagship lodge has been in existence for almost four decades. The lodge has a feeling of history, with a main house of weathered wood and a collection of elegantly simple cabins that seem to fit seamlessly into the wild surrounds. By virtue of the fact that Reserva Amazonica is a veteran of the area, its strength is in its selection of mild to wild adventures on offer, and we quickly plan our next few days with our personal guide. Tomorrow will begin well before dawn, so we settle in for the night not long after dusk. As the light fades, a cacophony reverberates from the surrounding vegetation; at first whistles, then hoots and squawking, followed by mimicry, rustles and deep lingering howls. Welcome to the jungle.

DAY TWO It's well before dawn and we're already battling through vegetation-clogged capillaries of the river in a shallow canoe. I'm barely conscious and tuned out as our diminutive guide nonchalantly reels off what begins to appear to me a list of all the ways we could die. Suddenly, I'm very much awake. She points to caimans (a kind of smaller, snappier crocodile) glowering under the murky water, laments that the boa (constrictors!) who visited the cabins last week didn't stay longer and then begins to describe in graphic detail the tropical diseases carried by the mosquitoes who, as if on cue, have begun to assail us. It is with this last observation that Pablo, our photographer, begins to flail around and release a peal of expletives demonstrating the wonderfully imaginative vocabulary of a modern man of Madrid. "The magazine should be called *Vogue Killing*," he mutters. In solidarity with my phobic photographer and trying not to rock the boat further, I hope to elicit some empathy from our guide (who seems just a little too amused) with the query: "Is there perhaps anything you are scared of?" Her brown eyes widen slightly and she steadies herself: "Well, I am very scared of puppy dogs and cows."

We are headed to Lake Sandoval, a major gathering place for wildlife. The lodge never guarantees sightings but on this day, a parade of monkeys, birds and river beasts line up for viewing. Throughout the week, each guide demonstrates a particular skill, honed by experience and affinity with the surrounds; from the slightest leaf movement or ripple in the water, they can spot and name members of the animal kingdom surrounding us. The most vivid and exciting of all are perhaps the macaws. Oversized, haughty and impossibly colourful, they are the drag queens of the parrot world.

DAY THREE It's a 45-minute walk from the lodge to Reserva Amazonica's jewel. High in the trees – 27 metres high, to be precise – perches a small cabin built in 2010 that has quickly become the lodge's signature offering. The whimsical little hut in the trees inspires a yearning to channel Kipling's Mowgli and see out the days swinging from the trees in a loincloth. After scaling the heights of the canopy, it was time to move on to Hacienda Concepcion, a kind of diffusion line of the lodge – slightly less bespoke but no less comfortable. The Hacienda has a shady past, with a German expat using the location as a kind of tropical disease test lab. One of the more positive legacies of this Western witch doctor is a wonderfully preserved medicinal 'garden' in the forest jungle. The variety, adaptability and complexity of the plants are stunning. *Para para* (up, up!) is the natural forebear to Viagra, apparently; an aphrodisiac lure and my numb mouth attest to the powerful properties of a chewable leaf.



The individual cabins at Reserva Amazonica, OPPOSITE TOP, are lit with hurricane lamps every night and are a study in sophisticated eco-tourism. OPPOSITE BELOW: every guest is given the essential jungle kit to avoid having to fill their suitcases with raincoats, gumboots and insect repellants. THIS PAGE: the magical Canopy Tree House is the star attraction of Reserva Amazonica.



DAY FOUR From Puerto Maldonado we travel to Iquitos, the most isolated and densely populated city in the Amazon. Iquitos means 'isolated by water'; the only way to reach it is by boat or plane. Originally accessible only by a three-week journey up the Amazon, this city was the boomtown of rubber in the early 20th century but has long been deserted by the barons. Forced to fend on its own, Iquitos has grown into a strange, exotic hub. Swarms of mopeds roar around the streets and the wilds of the jungle come into port. Far from safe, the city has a lawless atmosphere, a magnet for misfits and eccentrics keen to lose themselves in isolation or via the popular hallucinogen, ayahuasca. The Belén Market that anchors the city is a floating labyrinth and possibly the most exotic marketplace on earth. With the heat, lack of basic infrastructure and shocking sights at every turn, it is not for the faint-hearted. In a few quick minutes, I observe whole turtle carcasses split open, monkeys and parrots chained, piranhas piled high and weird fruits that defy classification. It makes for a surreal and at times confronting spectacle that is a jolting reminder of the wild nature of the Amazon. Iquitos is, somewhat sensibly, often skipped over by tourists who embark immediately to the boats that cruise the river. For those brave enough to experience the unsanitised frontier, it is unforgettable.

DAY FIVE I had always thought of a holiday on a cruise ship as akin to being trapped on a floating prison: cramped little cells, dire food, a regimented daily constitution and absolutely no say in your company.

FROM ABOVE LEFT: river fish split open with their egg sacks on display at Belén Market; the 'Shaman's stalls' at the market offer obscure skulls, bones, potions and cocoa leaves; the sprawling Belén Market. OPPOSITE, FROM TOP LEFT: reputedly designed by Gustave Eiffel, this solid iron house of a former rubber baron remains in the centre of Iquitos; a woman sells jungle-grown casava; bark used in a hallucinogenic brew called ayahuasca; a local intrigued by our cameras; chicken carcasses for sale.





OPPOSITE: the rooftop deck of the eight-person-only Delfin I is the perfect spot for a happy-hour passionfruit pisco sour. THIS PAGE: the boat's incredibly spacious and comfortable rooms feature floor-to-ceiling windows, two with on-deck jacuzzis. BELOW: the bow of the Delfin I churns up the Amazon at dusk.



It was with that prejudice that I boarded the Delfin I but, still charged with the drama of Iquitos, it did not take long to settle into the ship's languid luxury. The wonderful wood-finished vessel has a capacity for eight guests only and is comfortably appointed with improbably large rooms, two replete with on-deck jacuzzis. By some act of wizardry, the three meals served on board each day are fresh and creative. Most crucially, the crew lets you find your own pace... and space.

DAY SIX Over the week, Pablo has developed an obsession with piranhas. He has visions of being eaten alive by the, frankly, timid little fish. When the opportunity arises to swim in the Amazon, I take my chance to prove once and for all that the little nippers are "more scared of you than you are of them". We take the canoe out to a safe spot, passing a school of pink dolphins and a giant expanse of water lilies. I admit to momentary apprehension after leaping into the water but it quickly dissolves as we paddle around in the mightiest river of all. Swimming in the Amazon struck from the bucket list. Celebratory passionfruit pisco sours await us on the deck.

DAY SEVEN I wake to witness dawn on the last day of the journey as the Delfin meanders into port. There is nothing quite like the beginning of the day on the Amazon. As the jungle world wakes up, the trees that line the shore rustle with sloths and monkeys; birds of every hue, size and song dot the sky and the river itself seems alive. It makes one feel quite small, an observer of another world in motion of which you are not really a part. It is vital that it remains so, that we tread lightly and feel the privilege of being invited into this most mysterious and precious jungle. **VL**



The shallow canoes that transport guests to Reserva Amazonica lie in wait, ready for the following day's adventures.

TRAVEL NOTES

Vogue Living stayed at Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica rainforest lodges, adjacent to Peru's Tambopata National Reserve. Visit Inkaterra Reserva Amazonica at inkaterra.com/en/reserva-amazonica. Vogue Living flew with LAN Airlines, which offers daily one-stop flights from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, with onward connections to Lima, Peru. Passengers from other Australian cities can connect with LAN's flights in Sydney or Auckland. For more information, call 1800 558 129 or visit lan.com. Vogue Living sailed with Amazon river cruises in Peru; they offer packages from USD\$3200 per person for four days/three nights (master suite) to USD\$4000 per person for five days/four nights (deluxe master suite); prices are set to increase in 2013. Visit Delfin Amazon Cruises at delfinamazoncruises.com. For visitor information about Peru, visit PromPeru at peru.travel.